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AP Literature Period 1

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Analysis of *In Flanders Fields*

John McCrae’s renowned poem *In Flanders Fields* is an epic reflection on the debilitating deaths associated with World War I. Written from the point of view of the dead soldiers, John McCrae effectively relays a wide scope of emotion, establishing a somber tone, a patriotic theme, and a memorial for generations to come.

World War I is often referred to as the Great War. It marked a great evolution in weaponry and technology, resulting in a drastic increase in casualties. Trench warfare and mustard gas were among the most common tactics employed by military officers along with monotonous bombs and shelling. The repercussions throughout the soldiers were not only physical, but mental as well. Often referred to as the “lost generation,” these soldiers returned to an unfamiliar society in which they could not effectively associate with others and often withdrew in to depression. Also, the critical period in which men establish residences and mature was tarnished by the turmoil of war. While most young men did not have the pleasure to return home, those who did suffered greatly while making the transition back into reality.

A medical professional in the military, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae was a skillful doctor who documented his reflections one day in the form of a poem called *In Flanders Fields*. McCrae wrote the poem as a response to recently burying a fellow comrade and friend in Flanders Fields and it has since become one of the most well known poems of the Great War.

*In Flanders Fields* is written from the point of view of those men in the war recently deceased. John McCrae wrote this poem gazing out at the cemetery where “the poppies blow/ between the crosses row on row” (1.2-3) and took on the persona of those men lying in their graves. While the point of view of the speakers is first person, the Dead are referring to themselves collectively in order to emphasize unity even in death. The Dead’s audience is the soldiers whom are to replace them in the trenches and the Dead are relaying the important mission “to take up our quarrel with the foe” (1.10).

The first two stanzas focus more on the remembrance and memorial of the Dead, but the final stanza devotes its message to persuade the replacement soldiers to continue fighting. Through this setup, John McCrae develops a shift in tone in between the second and third stanza. The expository atmosphere relies solely on sadness and hollowness to establish a detached, solemn tone. This correlates with McCrae’s intention for those stanzas to act as a eulogy for the dead soldiers. In contrast, the last stanza tends to evoke a more patriotic outlook on the war with its employment of a symbolic torch that the soldiers were obligated to “throw” (1.11).

Imagery also assisted in developing McCrae’s overall mindset throughout the poem, focusing on the details of the cemetery through the application of a variety of senses. McCrae literally wrote down the images and events occurring in front of him. His sense of touch relayed “the poppies blow[ing]” (1.1) in the breeze and “dawn” (1.7). Although dawn obviously cannot literally be felt, it emphasizes the fact that just recently those soldiers buried in Flanders Fields fell due to trench warfare. Above the burial site one can hear the larks “bravely singing” (1.4) and in the distance the sound of guns. The auditory sensory capabilities within the poem allow the reader to visualize every aspect of the scene, including the sounds. Most importantly, detailed images are revealed through insightful descriptions of the cemetery. Poppies and crosses on the gravesites deliver the audience a typical scene from a warfront outpost. McCrae’s reminiscence of the Dead’s last “sunset” (1.7) both symbolizes beauty and the end to the soldier’s life, just as a sunset signifies the end to any day. The Flanders Fileds cemetery with poppies growing on the graves alludes to the fact that war is rampant and evokes a nationalistic emotion where the soldiers must “hold [the torch] high” (1.12) in honor of their country, beliefs, and those “who die”(1.13).

Distinct examples of figurative language occur throughout the poem, specifically those referring to a torch and the Dead. The symbolic torch signifies the soldier’s sacrifice and mission on the frontlines. It is passed from one soldier to the next in a seemingly infinite span of men who chose to serve their country in World War I. This torch can also be an allusion to the Olympic games in which, at the opening ceremony, a torch is passed between runners to show that the traditions are preserved. The passing of the torch between soldiers represents the succession of duty and responsibility to defend their country. In addition, McCrae’s figurative language dealing with the Dead as a title stresses their unison and perseverance to serve for the cause even in death. Both the torch and the Dead as the functioning central perspective of the poem assist in relaying McCrae’s outpouring of emotions and opinions.

As a dabbler in the poetic field, McCrae was no stranger to penning a poem. *In Flanders Fields* follows the distinct rhyming scheme of a rondeau poem in correlation with a falling meter. McCrae’s constriction of the poem into such tight parameters provides the piece of work a structure and rhythm while still establishing an easily discernible tone of depression. This somber atmosphere slows the audience down in their reading of the poem and subsequently emphasizes certain sections or details of *In Flanders Fields*.

Conveying a perceptible tone of somberness throughout the poem also aids in establishing a reflection on death and the various reasons for dying. While McCrae focuses on the consequences of war, this poem can generalize the typical reactions and emotions related to death. However, in this specific case, the poem’s purpose is to accentuate a soldier’s sacrifice and devotion to their comrades through the support and unity of a common goal.

McCrae’s approach to detailing his experience in the war reflected more on the dead and the cemetery than the actual war. This is probably because, as a doctor, McCrae was often exposed to the horrors of death and was more familiar with the cemetery than the frontlines of the battle. He separates the poem into three stanzas to iterate three specific aspects of the war: death, dying, and a continuation of the cycle. McCrae’s deliverance is not boisterous and lacks bitterness in tone. He eloquently delivers an insightful reflection on death in World War I through the structure of a poem.

Work Cited

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Annotation

1. Speaker
   * Who is the speaker? The soldiers during World War I who have fallen.
   * What is the speaker's point of view? 1st person, from the soldiers’ perspective
   * Who is the speaker's audience? The soldiers who are to replace their fallen comrades.
   * What is the speaker's topic, argument, etc.? Death and passing on a purpose to the replacement soldiers.
2. Tone
   * What is the dominant tone in the poem? Sad, somber, detached, hollow
   * Does the tone of the poem shift? Where? Why? Shift between 2nd and 3rd stanza, describes death then shifts to a more patriotic outlook of passing on “the torch” (1. 12) and continuing the fallen’s mission.
3. Imagery
   * Using the five senses (feel, hear, see, smell, taste) isolate the main images
   * FEEL: breeze, “dawn” (1.8) HEAR: guns, birds calling, SEE: “sunset” (1.8), guns, birds, crosses, poppies SMELL: death, poppies,
   * What is suggested by the use of the image? In cemetery, poppies blowing over graves, warfare nearby
   * Does the image provoke an emotion or idea? How? Sadness and solemnity through description of cemetery, still evokes patriotic tendencies to “hold [the torch] high” (1.12)
4. Figurative Language
   * Be able to find, discuss, and understand the figurative language used in the poem. Torch, sleep, “we are the Dead” (1.6)
   * Use the list of literary devices that are listed below. Symbolism, personification, archaic language, repetition
5. Sound
   * What sound elements are the most prominent? Why? Aabba aabc aabbac rhyming scheme
   * Use the list of literary devices that are listed below. Falling meter, rondeau
   * How does the sound element help to reinforce the meaning of the poem. Depresses atmosphere, slows audience down
6. Theme
   * What is the theme of the poem? Reflect on death and emphasize reason for dying
   * What is the purpose of the poem? To show even the dead still have mission to pass on, reveal effects of war
   * How does the poem help to exemplify the theme? Focuses on one subject per stanza, is not boisterous but solemn, vividly describes cemetery not actual war